

£1.25

The

Vol 122 No 9
September 2002

Freethinker

Secular Humanist monthly

Founded by G W Foote in 1881

Midsummer madness!

Police badges must change so as not to offend Muslims and other non-Christians. This story – and several other crazy religious tales – make up our Midsummer Madness roundup on the centre pages



How insensitive can the police be? Here three Brighton bobbies sport gay pride rainbow flags on their helmets at last month's Pride parade in the city – oblivious to the feelings of Christian and Muslim fundamentalists who each year make clear their opposition to festivals of this sort. Left: this detail from a British Transport Police badge shows the tiny cross which so upset a Muslim traffic warden that the police are now preparing to dump it..



Also in this issue:

Rationally speaking – p2

More religion at the taxpayer's expense – p3

NSS demands: 'Free Thought for the Day!' – p4

Pope Leo I visits the Vatican – p7

Rationally speaking: Dr Massimo Pigliucci

IMAGINE you are about to have a mystical experience. You may be absorbed in prayer in the silence of your room, or perhaps you are meditating and – helped by the lack of distraction to your senses – you are about to experience a feeling of unity with the universe, an experience that will reinforce your conviction that there really is another world out there; that what we call reality is only a pale reflection of the real thing. The question is: what is going on in your brain while all this is happening? Are your mental powers, in fact, allowing you to, at least temporarily, gain a higher view of the universe? Or, is your brain simply malfunctioning under unusual circumstances and playing tricks on you? In the following, I will lay out the evidence as best as we can assess it; by the end of this essay, you may wish to look into this matter more carefully and decide for yourself.

Andrew Newberg and Eugene D'Aquili, two researchers interested in the neurobiology of mystical experiences, carried out an intriguing set of experiments. They asked Buddhist meditators and Franciscan nuns, respectively, to try to achieve a state of deep meditation or prayer

while in an isolated room in a laboratory. The subjects were hooked to a computerized scanning machine that could visualize which parts of their brains were unusually active or inactive. The results were very similar in the two cases. For one thing – and not surprisingly – the brains of the meditators and nuns activated areas that are associated

The Freethinker is pleased to have gained a valuable new contributor – DR

MASSIMO PIGLIUCCI, an Associate Professor at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, where he teaches ecology and evolutionary biology. He has just published *Denying Evolution: Creationism, Scientism and the Nature of Science* (Sinauer, \$24.99) which takes a fresh look at the evolution-creation controversy. More about Dr Pigliucci and his book at <http://fp.bio.utk.edu/skeptic>



with intense concentration: praying or meditating is an intellectual activity that requires effort on the part of the brain. More interestingly, Newberg and D'Aquili saw that another region of the brains of their subjects was going almost completely dead: the posterior superior parietal lobe. This area is known to be in charge of determining the boundaries of one's body, a fundamental task for any living being because it allows us to navigate a complex three-dimensional world with no more accidents than occasionally spilling the coffee.

We know that the posterior superior parietal lobe plays that particular role because there are patients with damage in this same region who literally cannot move around without falling, missing the chair they intended to sit on, and generally having a fuzzy understanding of where their body ends and the rest of the universe begins. It is a truly awful condition, one of many that have taught neurobiologists so much about the inner workings of the human brain.

Now, what is interesting is that Newberg and D'Aquili's subjects described their mystical experience in an uncannily similar way to the reports of brain-damaged patients: they said that, at the peak of their meditation or prayer, they felt "one with the universe", feeling a dissolution of their bodies into the wholeness of reality. The brain scans supported their interpretation of what was happening: because of the low level of sensorial stimuli (the experiments were being conducted in dark rooms with no sounds) the brain was fed little in the way of information about the outside world and simply shut down the corresponding areas (possibly to save energy: the brain is by far the metabolically most costly organ we have).

The question is: were the Franciscan nuns and Buddhist meditators really accessing an alternative reality, or were they simply experiencing an odd side-effect of putting their brains

under unusual circumstances?

Michael Persinger is a Canadian neurobiologist who, like Newberg and D'Aquili, is interested in scientifically investigating mystical experiences. He has started out with the known fact that some patients who suffer from seizures in the temporal lobes are subject to auditory or visual hallucinations, which they often interpret as mystical experiences. Some of these patients are convinced that they talked to God and that, as a result, they gained a special "cosmic" insight into reality, consciousness, and the meaning of life. Persinger set out to literally repeat these experiences under controlled laboratory conditions. He built a helmet that causes small, intense, and directed magnetic fields inside the brain to simulate micro-seizures that do not cause any permanent damage. In perfectly Victorian tradition, the good doctor has experimented upon himself and found that magnetically induced seizures in the temporal lobes do indeed generate the same sort of hallucinations and mystical experiences reported by the patients.

Again, what is going on? Is Persinger's helmet a machine that can potentially put everybody in direct contact with God, or does it show that many mystical experiences are in fact caused by seizures, that is by a malfunction of the normal brain circuitry?

Here is where the facts end and the theorizing begins. From the point of view of purely logical possibilities, the "faulty-brain-under-unusual-circumstances" and the "triggered-real-mystical-experiences" interpretations are both possible, and we are free to believe whatever fits better with our general outlook on such matters. However, I would argue that by far the simplest and most reasonable explanation of the facts is indeed the naturalistic one (i.e., that we are witnessing a temporary malfunction of the brain triggered by abnormal conditions such as sensorial deprivation or seizures). Why? First, this interpretation fits with all we know about the brain, the phenomenon of hallucination, and even the natural tendency of human beings to invent explanations when faced with unusual sense data. Second, if God really built that ability in our brains for the purpose of communicating, why did He choose to make it much easier for some individuals and essentially impossible for others to achieve such a state of blessing? Third, it is interesting that different subjects interpret their experiences differently, depending on their cultural background and previous beliefs, again something that fits better with a naturalistic explanation than with the refined plan of a supernatural being.

Either way, you'll have to use your brain to reach a conclusion, but how do you know that you are not having a seizure that is biasing your judgment? Isn't the human brain a wonderful thing to ponder with and about?

The Freethinker

UK ISSN 0016-0687
Editor Barry Duke

Views expressed in the magazine are not necessarily those of the publishers.

Subscriptions, book orders and fund donations to the publisher:

Freethinker/G W Foote & Co Ltd
25 Red Lion Square
London WC1R 4RL

E-mail: fteditor@aol.com

Website:

<http://www.freethinker.co.uk>

Annual postal subscription rates

12 months: UK £15 or £10 unwaged. Overseas surface mail (including Republic of Ireland) £18 sterling. Air mail £25 sterling. Overseas subscribers are requested to obtain sterling drafts from their banks, but if remittance is in foreign currency (including Republic of Ireland) please add the equivalent of £5 sterling or USA \$8 to cover bank charges. Alternatively, send at your own risk currency notes, convertible in the UK, plus bank charges equivalent to USA \$3. Special trial subscription for readers' friends and contacts: £5 for six months. Send name and address of recipient with £5 cheque or postal order made payable to G W Foote and Company to the Freethinker, PO Box 26428, London SE10 9WH.

Printed by Derek Hattersley & Son
Sheffield

Virgin Birth? Even the clergy has stopped believing that old myth

WIDESPREAD public scepticism in Britain regarding Christianity's core beliefs is now becoming apparent among the clergy too – and women priests are even more likely to express disbelief than their male counterparts.

According to a study carried out by the traditionalist Anglican campaigning group Cost of Conscience among 4,000 clerics, only three out of 10 women priests believe in the Virgin Birth; and while eight of 10 male priests believe that Jesus died to take away the sins of the world, only six out of 10 woman priests held this view.

Said the Rev Robbie Low, Vicar of St Peter's, Bushey Heath, and spokesman for Cost of Conscience: "The people out there in the pews have no idea that this going on. They might think their vicar is a bit strange sometimes, but they won't be aware that he does not believe 75 per cent of what he stands up and says each Sunday."

For 53 per cent of male clergy, Jesus is the only way to salvation, but only 39 per cent of women priests accept this idea. With regard to the bodily resurrection of Jesus, 68 per cent of male respondents, but only 53 per cent of the women, said they believed this had actually happened.

Rev Low said "There are effectively two churches coexisting uncomfortably in the Church of England – one that is overwhelmingly convinced of the historic truths of the Christian faith, and one that is, at best, dubious and, at worst, frankly disbelieving."

The survey revealed that the highest rate of disbelievers were to be found among members of the Affirming Catholicism movement, whose founder members include the Archbishop-designate of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams.

In an article in *The Times* of August 1, Peter Mullen, chaplain to the Stock Exchange, wrote:

In Decline and Fall, Evelyn Waugh remarks: "There is a species of person called a Modern Churchman who draws the full salary of a beneficed clergyman and need not commit himself to any religious belief."

This week's report into the unbelief among many of the clergy shows that Waugh's joke is also an ugly truth. Many modern churchmen deny the Virgin Birth, or argue that it is peripheral to the faith. But it isn't. It is in the Creeds and has been

an article of faith for Christians everywhere from the earliest centuries. It is at the very centre of the Church's teaching.

Without a belief in the Virgin Birth all other doctrines of faith unravel and the doubter has really departed from Christian orthodoxy. Liberals, by denying the Virgin Birth and the Immaculate Conception –

that the Virgin Mary was conceived without any stain of Original Sin – diminish her status, making her just an also-ran rather than the second most important figure in the Gospels. They also, in effect, diminish Jesus's unique entry into the world, and, following from that, his unique status.

More religion at the public's expense

NSS Newslines report

THE British Army, it seems, is based on a "Christian ethos" and requires a substantial increase in the number of chaplains to minister to the needs of all those pious, church-going young soldiers.

This is the finding of a report entitled *An Investigation into the Need for Spiritual Values in the Army* by Brigadier I D T McGill, which also says that the number of chaplains should be increased from 150 to 175 over the next five years.

This year's target increase of 16 additional new chaplains has already resulted in eight new recruits. Lt Colonel Robert Bruce, Principal Staff Officer at the Chaplains Department, is hopeful that they will reach the target. "We would be disappointed if they don't, and we are making an endeavour to do so," he said.

The taxpayer will pick up the tab for the salaries of these people.

Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the National Secular Society, said: "Soldiers are no different from any other part of society – they are no more likely to be believers than the rest of the population. In fact, given their relative youth, they are much more likely not to believe. Why on earth is it imagined that they need so many priests and chaplains? Why are they marched off to services that, according to statistics, only a tiny percentage will be interested in? If these young men and women need counselling because of the terrible job they have to do, then they should be offered it by people without an agenda. If the

Government is serious about wanting to increase the representation of Britain's ethnic minorities in the armed services, the priests should be replaced by secular counsellors so that all soldiers can make use of their services – not just Christians."

When in Dubai don't drive or blaspheme

INTERNET-based company Star Asia Travel produces fact sheets for people planning visits to unfamiliar destinations.

Here are two tips regarding Dubai:

1. If you decide to hire a car in Dubai also hire a driver. Dubai is Arab, and road rules are considered completely unnecessary. Although we have been assured that there is a method to the madness of swerving cars, it is unlikely that you are going to master this on your first visit.
2. Although Dubai is a tolerant society, one area to exercise caution is in discussing religion. In particular, do not take the Lord's name in vain. It is reported that two Australians are currently serving a prison sentence for this offence.



Thought for the Day row is a symptom of a

The exclusion of atheists, humanists and other flavours of non-believers from the *Thought for the Day* (*Tfd*) slot on the *Today* programme has been a bone of contention in our movement for over 30 years.

"Why couldn't our voices be heard on it?" we wanted to know. Why was it reserved exclusively for religious "thoughts"? David Tribe (then NSS President) wrote an excellent booklet called *British Brainwashing Corporation* in the 1970s devoted to this issue. It could have been written yesterday – the BBC relentlessly promoted religion back then, much as it does now.

At that stage the slot was called *Lift up Your Hearts*, and its change not long afterwards to *Tfd* had been understood to herald a lifting of the ban. This turned out to be misplaced optimism. A more recent false dawn followed a meeting in February 2001 between BBC's Head of Television Mark Thompson and the NSS's President Denis Cobell, Media Officer Terry Sanderson and me. Mr Thompson was most sympathetic to our case, to the point that we even discussed how the lifting of the ban should be handled in publicity terms. Before the follow up meeting took place, however, Alan Bookbinder was appointed head of Religion at the BBC, and he was asked to represent the Corporation at the meeting. It soon became clear that we were starting again from scratch.

Unlike his predecessor, the unyielding Reverend Ernie Rea, Alan Bookbinder was described as an "agnostic". This announcement was met with squeals of apprehension from the religious quarter; but so far these seem to have been, let's say, premature.

Quote of the month

"I'VE been aware of the madness of the Islamic world. The madness of the people who've fallen behind technically, and who do not have the will to make the intellectual effort to catch up.

"I was aware of the religious hatred. I was aware of the indifference to life. I was aware of the anti-civilisation aspect of the new fundamentalism. But I had no idea it had gone so far – the madness. The idea of their strength is an illusion. Nothing is coming from within. The terrorists can fly a plane, but what they can't do is build a plane."

– V S Naipaul,
The Times

**KEITH PORTEOUS
WOOD, Executive
Director of the
National Secular
Society, reports
on the
long-
running
stand-off
between
the BBC and
secularists
in the UK**



We doubt if Mr Bookbinder's agnosticism will turn out to be the benefit we had hoped for. If he moves the balance in favour of non-believers, the massed voices of the religious will screech: "What can you expect from an agnostic?" The poor man can't win. But, given that our voice is less influential there, it must be a temptation to opt for a quieter life.

There is evidence of substantial external pressure. The C of E general synod resolved to monitor religious broadcasting at one of its meetings and complain about it at every opportunity. The Bishop of Liverpool wrote a scathing attack in the *Daily Telegraph* on the BBC's, as he saw it, half-hearted commitment to religious broadcasting. The churches and minority religions are also undoubtedly piling on pressure behind the scenes. When a bishop shouts, the Corporation springs to attention – as if the ghost of Lord Reith were still stalking the corridors of Broadcasting House.

Mr Bookbinder's new department has become "Religion and Ethics" – but, so far, religion-based "ethics" still dominate. From the perspective of anyone wanting more religious programmes, appointing someone with a high reputation for programme making was a smart move. At a recent conference organised by a religious pressure group Alan Bookbinder announced that there would be several prestige programmes coming from his department and that extra time would be allotted for religious programmes in peak viewing periods on both BBC1 and BBC2.

The BBC is keen to point to programmes exploring areas of religious doubt, such as

Devout Sceptics, but these often focus on less mainstream brands of "spirituality". I do however acknowledge that there are now more programmes where non-religious ethics are included.

We must emphasise that our concerns run much deeper than *Tfd* being a proselytisation slot nestling in the middle of peak time prestigious current affairs programme. My perception, and that of all the non-believers I have asked, is that religion is insinuating itself more, rather than less, into BBC output. Predictably, this view is hotly disputed by the BBC Religious Affairs department.

Our meetings with Mr Bookbinder have been cordial and he listens to what we have to say. At our first meeting we expressed our concerns about just how marginalized non-believing voices are. Why couldn't secular humanist ethics be given much more of an outing on the BBC, as a relief from the relentless Morning Services, Evensongs and *Songs of Praise*?

Mr Bookbinder said he would seek the views of his colleagues on the opening up of *Tfd*, but urged us not to regard the issue as "totemic". Our response was that we regard it as symbolic. Were *Tfd* to be opened up to other ethical standpoints it would be a tangible demonstration of the BBC's commitment to diversity and fair play to non-believers.

The response was what we had feared. *Tfd* would continue to be reserved for comment from a "faith perspective" only, and that there was no evidence of "an appetite for change among the audience".

Ironically, not long afterwards, it came to light that *Tfd* was in crisis. An internal examination of it had found it to be "trite" and a new producer had been brought in to try to "refresh" it. Surely this was our chance. If *Tfd* needed sharpening, we knew just the people who could do it.

Fortunately, the NSS had by then asked the BHA and the RPA to join with us in gathering signatories from our distinguished supporters to a letter to the BBC Board of Governors demanding that *Tfd* be opened up. One hundred famous writers, scientists, academics, politicians, philosophers – including a Nobel Peace Prize winner – had put their name to our letter. It was like the first twenty pages of *Who's Who*. It could not be ignored.

The NSS spearheaded the publicity campaign which one commentator likened to "pressing a nuclear button", and it garnered headlines all around the world. It was generally supportive, although the *Daily Telegraph* and *Daily Mail* were reduced to trying to convince their readers that *Tfd* was barely religious.

The *Today* programme took up the issue

larger cultural battle

with glee, mischievously commissioning Richard Dawkins to deliver an atheist *TfiD* of his own (although not in the official slot). We are aware that the *Today* programme producer Rod Liddle is personally irritated by *TfiD* and would like to see it scrapped completely.

The NSS outlined its case on the programme and the topic was referred to time and again for much of the next week. Philosopher Dr Anthony Grayling deserves a special mention in that he articulated our case on the programme, in conversation with Rabbi Lionel Blue, who made no attempt to justify the retention of the ban.

This was not the case for another speaker, *TfiD*'s producer, reportedly a Methodist. She argued that our inclusion would change the whole character of the programme. She was adamant that there would be no change, giving

the impression that her argument should be the end of the matter. Was she privy to the outcome of an emergency meeting of the Governors (rather unlikely since our petition had only just been delivered), or was she – for some reason – certain she knew how they would decide? Let's hope not.

We were pleased to learn that of the something like 1,000 e-mails that had arrived at *Today* after the programme, for every one supporting the *status quo*, there were two calling for the non-religious to be included or the entire slot to be dropped.

This completely undermines the BBC's principal rebuttal: the assertion that there was no appetite among the *Today* audience for change.

We consider that our case over *TfiD* is one of justice and discrimination.

We hope the Governors will look at our petition objectively, and see that the public mood is with us. Having got this far, we are not going to give up now. If we are turned down, we have made plans to fight on.

• The *TfiD* confrontation follows recent skirmishes—such as the battle over additional religious schools—that mark the intensification of the cultural war that is developing in this country. The struggle is hotting up between those who believe and those who don't. Despite, or perhaps because of, its dwindling support, religion is flexing its muscles more than it has done for decades.

And more and more of the population are waking up to the dangers that this poses.

CONNOISSEURS of the utterly barking should visit the site of the Antipas Christadelphians with indecent haste. It's at <http://www.antipas.org/index.shtml>, and it made me weep with laughter. I know that's not the intention of the site, but if anyone is looking to parody for their own nefarious purposes any kind of fundie literalism, this has got to be about the best model around.

From there, to calm one's hilarity, go to the Dull Mens Club at <http://www.dullmen.com/default.htm>. I'm sure that women are allowed in too. Anyway, who's to know? It's a riot of grey and beige, and has features on things like the history of Mayonnaise. It's also entirely free of exclamation marks, religion, and anything at all calculated to excite.

Now that you're suitably calm you may be in the mood for a little philosophy. Take a look at *The Philosophers Magazine Online* at <http://www.philosophers.co.uk/>.

There's too much there to really describe in detail, but the great thing about it is way in which it makes philosophy accessible to those without a training in the mysteries of the subject. One of the sections, sternly entitled Fun and Games, sets various tests and offers feedback about one's performance in them. Some are really quite thought-provoking. Give some of them a go and see if you are consistently rational as you hoped you were.

A little philosophy will be a great preparation for the next site. Sorry about the URL, which is <http://www.godstruth.org/>, a title that may offend more sensitive freethinkers. It's the web version of a book by Alan Hayward, who was mentioned in a letter in the August *Freethinker*. He's a scientist and (whoo!) bible-believing Christian. Read for yourself the half-witted drivel he spouts, and

Webwatch with Norman Pridmore

despair. But not too deeply, please. It's not worth it.

When I moved in more cosmopolitan circles I was frequently (at first, anyway – till they got to know me) accosted by Sci N Tologists, those blank-eyed children of Do Doo Ron Hubbub, or whatever his name was (cunning distortions of names here intended to ward off the hordes of lawyers the buggers send round whenever they are criticised ...).

The disturbed and paranoiac Hubbub's "ideas", promulgated in various dismal and ill-written tomes, were so off-the-wall that even Hollywood took a long time to come round to them.

Anyway, a great site which exposes some of the more "interesting" aspects of his system, as well as his life as the greatest scientist, pilot, sailor, doctor, writer, philosopher and past-maker (etc etc *ad nauseum*) that ever lived, is at <http://www.xenu.net/> It's called Operation Clambake, for some obscure reason. Recommend it to your scientist friends and watch them faint in coils, poor loves.

A magazine now – the excellent *Spiked*

Online. It's cantankerous and irritated and has a terrific variety of really good articles by some very fine writers. For some good off-centre opinion it's well worth a view. Read it at <http://www.spiked-online.com/>.

Index on Censorship has for 33 years been the primary source of information about what is going on internationally (and at home) in the field of the suppression of free speech. It's essential reading for anyone about the limits that state or religion try to place upon what we can or cannot say.

<http://www.indexonline.org/> is the address.

Addressing a similar theme from a different angle is the site of Privacy International. It was formed in 1990 as a watchdog and campaigning group concerned about government and business surveillance of private individuals. Visit it at <http://www.privacy-international.org/> – but be careful – someone may be listening ...

Lastly, what about all those annoying questions you wish someone would answer – like, is it really true that a ducks' quack has no echo? Be comforted – there is one who knows these things. I refer to the legendary Cecil Adams, of the Straight Dope website. This is a place where pedants and trivia addicts can ungird themselves, safe in the knowledge that the stuff they read is true. Given that freethinkers have an unnerving tendency towards wanting to get their facts straight at all times, I can't recommend this site too highly. Just go to <http://www.straightdope.com/index.html> and be astounded.

• Thanks for all the suggestions and help. And, as ever, more suggestions please to norman@npridmore.fsworld.co.uk

Good with God?

YOU only have to open your Sunday paper to find proof that being a Christian is far from a guarantee of good behaviour. But even among the common-or-garden non-headline-grabbing Christians, one encounters interesting case studies.

A friend tells me that when he was at university he took a walk along the beach with the supposedly chaste female head of the student Methodist society. As soon as they were out of sight it was he that was the chased one as she threw herself upon him, randy as a demented stoat.

My own experiences have also been illustrative. I did a one-year postgraduate course alongside a young Christian woman – we'll call her Veronica – who spent her time attempting to deep-throat her delusional belief systems onto the rest of us.

Does having a religion make you a better person? Many assume so; it's been suggested that this is why non-religious parents are often still in favour of religious education or choose to educate their children in church schools. HUGH THOMAS speaks as he finds, and begs to differ.

Close to the end of the course, I noticed an advertisement for a job for which I thought we could all apply. When I told Veronica, it transpired that she had already seen the ad and secretly applied without telling the rest of us. I remarked – naive or what? – to the effect that this was a surprising manner to behave for a Christian. Veronica replied that in the then-

prevailing job climate, “when it comes to jobs, it has to be the law of the jungle”.

The course finished and we went our separate ways. I lost touch with Veronica for a while. Then one day I turned up for an interview for the post of research assistant. Who should I run into outside but ... you guessed it, Veronica. Dressed in her best duck-egg blue suit she looked like the underside of an Airfix Messerschmitt Bf109E.

Swooping on me out of the sun, Veronica gushed that this was the job of her dreams. I was lukewarm, but alas for Veronica this indifference manifested itself in a demeanour of calm assurance.

“How do you think you did?” she asked as I emerged.

“Quite well I think,” I smiled.

Nervous as a kitten, she went in and fluffed her interview. I was offered the job and, after thinking about it for a week or two, casually accepted.

Far be it from me ever to take pleasure in others' misfortunes, but I wonder whether Veronica ever learned a lesson from this experience – for example, about co-operation or reciprocal altruism being better for everyone than “the law of the jungle”?

Who knows?

Although, come to think of it, maybe she was the lucky one. The boss where I pipped Veronica for the job was a strange person indeed. He tucked his shirt into his pants. To save time he drank his mid-morning coffee sitting on the lavatory. And worse than that: he too was a Christian. If only Veronica had thought to give the secret handshake she'd have been in there like the proverbial hairy bear.

He'd fixated instead on the fact that his son and I shared the same first name, taking this as an omen from on high. I suspect he may later have come to revise his view as to the origin of the sign.

“I'm a very lucky person; God is very kind to me,” he used to tell people. He even claimed that God found him parking spaces. The one time he tested this out with me present we drove into town on market day. The place was heaving, shoppers' cars filling every conceivable space.

“Don't worry;” he breezed, “God will look after us”. He drove on down the main street and, just as he was about to reach the end, a car pulled out and he eased straight into their space.

God wasn't very kind to him though the day he played in the staff-student cricket match. He came out in full whites with a tiny peaked cap perched on top of his head, took guard like a professional ... and received a vicious delivery in the gonads from the students'

Mecca schoolgirl deaths lead to Saudi education reform

FUNDAMENTAL changes in the way girls are educated in Saudi Arabia are currently being undertaken – but it took the death of 15 children in a fire at a girl's school in Mecca earlier this year to force long-overdue reform, according to Haleh Afshar, Professor of Politics and Women's Studies at the University of York.

Speaking on BBC's *Woman's Hour* on August 19, Ms Afshar said that promising changes were in the pipeline as a result of the sacking of the official in charge of all girls' schools in Saudi. Muslim cleric Ali bin Murshid el-Murshid headed a religious agency which had controlled the education of girls for 40 years. Following an inquiry into the fire, which found that the cleric's agency had neglected fire-safety measures, the Government acted swiftly to sack el-Murshid and merged his department with the mainstream Education Ministry.

More than 800 pupils and 55 teachers were in the 31st Girls' Middle School when the fire broke out. Most of the victims suffocated, fell from the windows of the four-storey building, or were trampled to death in the stampede to escape the school. Fifty other pupils were injured.

Ms Afshar said that women's rights organisations throughout Saudi and abroad were jubilant over el-Murshid's departure.

At the time of the fire, reports published throughout the world blamed Saudi's powerful religious police for the deaths of at least some of the girls. Eye witnesses claimed that the *Mutaween* – or Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice – had forced some of the girls fleeing the fire back into the burning building because they were “improperly dressed – that is, they had no head covering and were not wearing the *abaya* (long robe)”.

However, the official inquiry dismissed allegations against the religious police, and Interior Minister Prince Nayef said that members of the *Mutaween* were present at the incident only to prevent “mistreatment” of the girls.

But Jahal Khashoggi, Deputy Editor of *Arab News*, stands by his, and other newspaper reports of the incident, which described a stand-off between the the religious police and regular civil police and firefighters. Speaking on *Woman's Hour*, the journalist said that the *Mutaween* police only backed off when threatened with arrest.

The religious police have broad powers to arrest, investigate and mete out summary punishments, or refer to the courts individuals suspected of violating religious or moral codes.

In the past, members of the religious police would roam streets and shopping malls, beating women who were not covered according to Islamic teaching. In 1990, at the height of the Gulf War, religious policemen attacked American servicewomen for wearing shorts in public in the capital, Riyadh. An angry complaint from the US Government prompted the governor of Riyadh, Prince Salman, to order the religious police not to beat American women for dress-code violations.

demon fast bowler. "Oo you really hurt me," he squeaked once he could eventually talk again.

Christian morality is largely about the accumulation of make-believe rewards and the avoidance of imaginary punishment, whether

RESURRECTED by Gabriel, Pope Leo I (440-461) recently popped up at the Holy See. There, the zealous paladin of ecumenical orthodoxy chatted with Pope John Paul II. Afterwards, Leo indited an epistle to the Apostolic College of Primates Tertiary in Constantinople, with copies to the Metropolitans Regular of the Blessed Sacrament in Rome, the Canons Irregular of the Redemptive Blood, the Lay Daughters of the Franciscan Annunciades, and the Prioresses Minor of Our Lady of Infinite Epithets. Stamped "undeliverable", the letter was inexplicably propped against my weathered St Francis. By candlelight, I translated Leo's clangorous Latin into English (below). May the labor pass for penance.

To the keepers of the truth faith, greetings from Rome, circa 2000 A D: Grace from God the Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit.

Oh, what dismal tidings do I bear! Not the hubbub of the hour – that clerics practice pedophilia. Never mind the pedophiles. Lechery – like sloth, gluttony, and the poor – will always be with us. My news is of a darker dye.

A spiritual malaise infects the Bride of Christ. The quest for ecumenical dominion languishes. Pagan religions flourish. Schisms proliferate unchecked. Faith is flaccid. Tolerance spreads.

The true doctrine is imperiled by a thousand noxious creeds, ancient and newfangled: Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh, Baha'i, Jain, Shinto, Parsee, Mandeian, Muslim, Mormon, Anglican, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Unitarian, Methodist, Baptist, Assembly of God, Church of God, Nazarene, Jehovah's Witness, Secular Humanist – a vile menagerie of falsehood.

Within the Church, the laity is abysmally unedified. They confound begotten and made, substance and person, ousia and hypostases, homoousion and homoiousion, heanthropic and anthropotheic, transubstantiation and consubstantiation, Real Presence and Surreal Presence.

They misdirect inquiries because they muddle the purviews of secular tertiaries, regular tertiaries, minor

in the here-and-now or in the non-existent hereafter. Could such a philosophy of self-interest constitute even a possible basis for morality?

We secularists don't think we'll get our reward in heaven; we recognise that virtue is

Pope Leo I visits the Vatican

clerks regular, canonesses regular, prioresses, abbesses, friars minor, friars minor conventual, lay brothers, itinerant clergy, superiors-general, chaplains-general, chaplains-palatine, inquisitors-general, vicars-general, apostolic vicars, apostolic nuncios, ecclesiastical chamberlains, ecclesiastical judges, directors of

By Gary Sloan

pontifical taxes, penitentiaries of the diocese, prebendaries, legates, prelates, metropolitans, primates of the realm, novice masters, deacons, subdeacons, choir monks, lectors, secular priests, provincials, pastors, oblates, curates, procurators, almoners, sacristans, cantors, coadjutors, oratorians, refractories, suffragans, infirmarians, hospitalers, ostiaries, and other holy offices.

They don't know when to invoke the most puissant saints: Poppo, Bodo, Odo, Bruno, Dodo, Little Anthony, Narcissus, Gomer, Lucifer, Pudentiana, Lucy, Linus.

Without the infinite mercies of Our Lord, mediated by His earthly vicars, the doltish flock would die far from the odor of sanctity.

The shepherds, too. An effete clergy prefers comfort to the cross. No soldiers of austerity inspire the multitude. No Simeon Stylites sups on maggots while poised atop a sixty-foot pillar. No Amatus dwells in a deep crevice, his meager ration of barley and water lowered on a rope. No Adolph daily lashes himself until he bleeds. No Conrad rolls in thorns to rout the demons of carnal temptation. Where is the priest who hourly immerses himself in freezing water, chomps on his tongue, and bangs

its own reward. Ours is therefore an inherently superior basis for morality.

However, I do think we all ought to try to be open-minded enough to accept that just because someone is a Christian, it doesn't necessarily make them a bad person.

his head against a rock? Where are the indefatigable flagellants of flesh, the princes of penance, the athletes of ascetism?

The present heir to the apostolic succession is a decrepit parlor soldier discomfited by the spurting blood that nourishes Truth. He squirmed when I recounted the sanguinary measures the Church adopted to squelch Arianism, Marcionism, Encratism, Pelagianism, Semipelagianism, Manichaeism, Donatism, Montanism, Albigenianism, Catharism, Waldensianism, Modalism, Rigourism, Monothelitism, Nestorianism, Eutychianism, and other invidious heterodoxies that threatened the immortal souls of hapless proselytes.

Now, heresies sprout like weeds. Yet the squeamish bishop of Rome pretermits rack and screw, boiling cauldron, glowing tong, slashing ax. While lackeys of Satan ravish the Bride of Christ, the doddering bishop maunders about peaceful co-existence.

Co-existence with darkness!

Good primates, lift me with your prayers. I shall again seek the papacy, which the ailing bishop must soon surrender. After investiture, I shall scythe the weeds.

• Gary Sloan, a retired English professor in Ruston, Louisiana, writes for *American Atheist*, *Free Inquiry*, and the Scripps-Howard News Service.

Campaigning Coffee Mugs

THE NSS has produced a souvenir coffee mug – black with gold lettering that reads: "Religion is the Problem, Not the Answer."

If you'd like one (or several) send cheque or PO for £4.99 each (including post and packing) to: Mug Offer, National Secular Society, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL.

I just *knew* we would be in for a long, mad summer after reading God's letter in the *Los Angeles Times* of July 8. A while before that date – at midnight on December 28 last year to be precise – His Omnipotence, The Creator, sent a missive to that internationally-renowned religious leader and ex-jailbird, the Rev Sun Myung Moon and his lovely wife, saying: "I am the God of all people. You, the True Parents, have now succeeded in everything and have raised everything to its true level."

Then, lapsing into the male gender bias he introduced in the Old Testament, and so successfully carried forward to the New, His Omniscience added: "So you are now the Savior, Messiah and King of Kings of all of humanity!"

After waffling on for a few paragraphs in American English, the Celestial Sycophant concluded: "I, the God of all people, have faith. I believe in the True Parents. I know and remember all the difficulties, pain and suffering that you have had to endure. I have seen it all. It was all my responsibility, yet you endured and raised a victorious standard. How can I ever forget you? I am grateful ... My beloved True Parents, victory to you! Victory to the Saviors of humanity! Victory to the King of Kings. True Parents!"

Realising that God was now worshipping *him*, the Moonie-in-Chief (sorry, head of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, International) felt that it was time to reveal to the world his newest convert – and he did so by running a full-page ad in the *Los Angeles Times*.

Now when you're spending the sort of money the *Los Angeles Times* demands for a full-page ad in the main section, you must make sure that every word counts, and the Rev Moon saw to it that God's was by no means the only testimonial on the page.

Using his incredible influence (and possibly an ouija board or two), he managed to make contact

with, among others, Jesus, Peter, Paul, John Calvin, Martin Luther, John Wesley, St Augustine, Confucius, Muhammad, Karl Marx, Lenin, Stalin, and Deng Xiaoping (but not Mao – nor, for that matter, John Lennon, Bertrand



or even Jane **How sweet: God took time off from a busy schedule to write to Rev Sun M Moon**

Russell). Space does not permit a rerun of all their testimonials, exciting though they were (ho-hum), but I felt I *really* must relay Stalin's thoughts.

"Friends in Communist countries, I am Stalin. You have had wrong thinking. As the way you are going is not the way you should go, you must turn to the right path as soon as possible. One's life on the Earth determines the place one will live in the heavenly world ... Please receive the will of Reverend Moon completely, open your minds and build

er – but my favourite remains the one about pastor Melvyn Nurse, of Florida, USA. Nurse was preaching to a packed congregation at Livingstone Fellowship Church in Jacksonville in 1998 when he produced a revolver loaded with one blank bullet.

He was, according to associate pastor Michael Cooper, planning "to convey the point that sin leads to death. The idea was that he would spin the chamber Russian-roulette-style and hold the gun to his head."

After just one spin, the gun fired and the

Midsumme

churches for the worship of God and hold worship services. Reverend Moon reflects the image of God, even though he is a man, and he is struggling intensely to save Communist countries. His thought is messianic, especially for the communist countries. You must receive his ideology of peace immediately. I, the dictator who denied God, cry out to all the Communist countries in the Earth.

"Please believe in God and seek for Him."

My attention was drawn to the Rev Moon's ad by *Freethinker* Webwatch correspondent Norman Pridmore. I had hardly stopped laughing when Norman sent me another cracker – this one about an argument over heaven and hell that ended in a fatal shooting, in – appropriately, I suppose – Godley, Texas. "Someone here is in line for the Darwin award for daft ways of dying, surely!" said Norman in his covering note.

What happened was this. After a night touring the pubs in nearby Fort Worth, two young men – Johnny Joslin, 20, and Clayton Frank Stoker, a 21-year-old corrections officer – became involved in a liquor-fuelled religious argument. A witness told Johnson County Sheriff Bob Alford that talk turned to the subject of which of the two young men would go to heaven or hell. Stoker said he would settle the argument, and went into a house and returned with a shotgun, which he loaded. He then placed the muzzle in his mouth.

Joslin then took the gun from Stoker, saying, "If you have to shoot somebody, shoot me" The witness said the shotgun then went off. Joslin was hit in the chest, and fatally wounded. Stoker was arrested and charged with first-degree murder.

As God 'n' guns stories go, this was a cork-

You can always rely on the religious deeds, but this summer they appear more and irrational than usual. BARRIERS and antics with a mixture of amusement



No-one died in this recreation of Pastor Nurse's accidental suicide

Among the congregation of 200 who saw Nurse's demonstration of how *stupidity*, rather than sin, leads to death, were his wife and four daughters.

Instincts told me, after I received the Godley report, that weirdness was definitely in the air, and more strange stuff was imminent. I was not wrong. Out of an envelope fluttered a cutting a day later from the *Daily Mail* of July 30. It was headed: "Bodysuits let Pakistan's women escape from sporting purdar".

It was a report about a bodysuit which Muslim women swimming competitors can wear in international contests, apparently without contravening the country's strict Islamic dress code. Not that many will ever be seen in Pakistan, which has only two 50-metre pools – neither of which are open to women wanting to train for competition.

So what does this bodysuit look like? The

Daily Mail had a humorous stab at illustrating it, but I wanted to see the real thing, and did some internet research which turned up body-suits galore, but not the right ones – either they were made of bodyhugging lycra, which would never do, or were packed with explosives and designed for Muslim suicide bombers, not swimmers.

I then dipped into a young Muslim website, which invites one to “get the low-down on Islamic issues relating to your everyday life!” I really wish I hadn’t, because all it produced

parts of the body which people are prohibited by Islam from exposing to others (either of the opposite gender or the same gender). The woman’s *awrah* comprises everything except her hands and face, and the man’s *awrah* is everything between his navel and knees. The skimpy swimsuits worn by these athletes just don’t meet the Islamic dress code.

“It is important to keep in mind that a person could be ‘clothed but naked’. For example, competitors in races usually wear some sort of bodysuit that adheres very tightly to their skin

Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Malaysia. Muslims in this country haven’t travelled [to Muslim countries] as much as I have. I know.”

This is not the first time Franklin has publicly condemned Islam. Last year, he called Islam “evil”, and decried the conditions in countries ruled by Islamic law.

Graham then went on to demonstrate his own enormous tolerance and compassion by slamming a key strategy against AIDS. He said that those promoting safe sex and condoms “want to solve this thing so they can continue to live an immoral life style.”

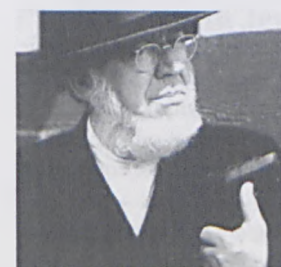
“God gave us sex, but he gave us parameters all around us. When we use sex outside the parameters God gave us, we’re at risk. Sex kills.” The parameters, he said, “are a man and woman in marriage. Nothing else.”

One wonder whether Graham will ever realise that there isn’t a fag paper’s width between his bigotry and that of the intolerant Muslims he denounces with such venom?

Now, to another group of balmypots – the architects of an *eruv* in north London.

So what’s an eruv then?

Under Orthodox Jewish law, the Sabbath (Friday night/Saturday) is a day set apart from the working week. Family time and spiritual pursuits are emphasised and certain activities associated with the working week are prohibited. But because this ban on carrying “created severe hardships and diminished the joy of the sabbath”, the religious



This man can now carry his prayerbook on the sabbath, thanks to the eruv loophole

court of King Solomon sought to distinguish between a truly public domain where all carrying is prohibited and a more localized area. Such a domain is called an *eruv* and it legally transforms a non-private public thoroughfare into a private area.

So what can Orthodox Jews carry in an eruv that they can’t elsewhere?

They can carry, among other things, prayerbooks, house keys, handkerchiefs, gloves, pocket watches, medication, food for hospital patients, and reading glasses.

And what activities might they perform in

(Continued on next page)

er madness!

religious to produce bizarre words and appear to have been far more zany
HARRY DUKE has been watching their
 element and despair.

was the same sad brand of depressing rant over sex and nudity one associates with redneck Baptists – oh, and a specific broadside against swimming.

Here are a few extracts.

- “Muslims think that pornography is only that uncensored filth that is accessible through XXX movies and certain Internet sites, but in fact, by Islamic standards, much of what is considered normal American advertising is actually pornographic.”
- “One of the most pervasive tools of pornography is the television. Shows like *Dawson’s Creek* and *Baywatch* have no other purpose except to display blatant degrees of nakedness and indecent scenes of intimacy. Movies also succeed in conveying lewd imagery by almost always including a love/lust story in the story line.
- “There are other forms of pornography on TV that are much more subtle. For example, most Muslims would not realise that several sports events include pornographic images. The swimsuits that are worn by both men and woman during the Olympics are iniquitously revealing. They expose the *awrah* of a woman and a man. The word *awrah* refers to those



and the exact shape of their body parts is apparent. This is almost equivalent to being naked, since it doesn’t take much imagination to figure out what is under such clothing.”

A day later I stumbled upon a news item concerning the Reverend Franklin Graham, heir to the legacy and chief executive officer of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA). Graham jnr, in an interview in Minneapolis in August, posed the question: “Where are the clerics. Why haven’t Muslim clerics from around the world gathered at Ground Zero, held hands together and prayed to Allah for forgiveness, and told the American people this is not Islam? Because they believe it was right. This is a just cause – their *jihad*.”

While Graham was in Minneapolis he took the opportunity of plugging his new book, *The Name*. Both his remarks and the book immediately drew a heated response from the Islamic community.

“Mainstream political leaders and religious figures must speak out against the growing demonization of Islam by extremist right-wing commentators and by representatives of the evangelical Christian community”, wailed Ibrahim Hooper, communications director of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, based in Washington, D C.

“Defamatory attacks on other faiths can only lead to a spiral of distrust and intolerance that will divide our society along religious lines,” he warned. Graham said that he makes no distinction between the faith of Islam and the policies and practices of countries run by Islamic law. “My goal is not to fight Muslims, but to look at the reality,” Graham said. “There is no tolerance under Islam. I’ve been to

Midsummer madness

an eruv?

Well, they can push a pram along with food and nappies, wear a rainhat, wear jewellery, and walk a dog on a leash.

What may they NOT do or carry in an eruv?

They may not carry items which are *muktesh* (things that may not be touched on the sabbath, like pens). They may not open or carry an umbrella, play ball or ride bikes, swim or carry anything in preparation for post-sabbath activity.

So what drew your attention to the eruv?

An item in the *Guardian* of August 10, which reported that "the plans have been finalised and the contractors briefed. Splashes of yellow paint have begun to appear on pavements in north-west London where the boundary posts will soon be erected. After a bitter battle a proposal to set up an eruv is to be realised. Over the next few weeks workers should begin to erect dozens of 30ft high poles connected by fishing line to enclose the six-and-a-half square-mile area".

Is the establishment of an eruv stupid, divisive, and guaranteed to make laughing stocks of the Jews?

Oh yes!

So why are they persisting with the scheme?

Because the people who want it cannot function without unthinking devotion to pettifogging, meaningless religious ritual.

Does the eruv have any redeeming features?

Yes, one that I know of. It will allow Millie Sampson to attend synagogue on the sabbath with her family, something she is unable to do now.

Why is that?

Because Millie Sampson has chronic asthma, which makes it difficult for her to go more than short distances without her wheelchair. It is forbidden to use a wheelchair on the sabbath, unless it is within the confines of an eruv.

What sort of religion would put such an obstacle in the way of a disabled worshipper?

A bloody silly and insensitive one.

According to the *Guardian* report, the United Synagogue – the leading Orthodox wing of British Judaism – claims the scheme will benefit thousands of observant Jews, but opponents fear the eruv could be divisive and make the area, which includes Golders Green, Hampstead Garden Suburb, Hendon and Finchley, a target for racist violence.

Others believe the scheme is a claim for territory which will lead to the area being "invaded" by Jewish people. They are angry that the poles and wire will form "gateways" into their neighbourhoods.

Some are puzzled as to why the followers

of a faith which imposes such restrictions go to such lengths to find loopholes.

Press reports about the eruv prompted Fabian Acker, a Jewish *Freethinker* reader, to pen the following:

One of the many elements of the intractable Middle East conflict is the orthodox Jews, who, unlike the rest of us, feel that they are somehow fulfilling God's demands about populating the land, while ignoring the one about not killing. There are similar fanatics on the other side no doubt, but I can only speak from my side.

It's tragic – unlike the antics of the orthodox Jews in North London, which are farcical. But the attitude is the same, and farce slips easily into tragedy. Which is why we, Jews and non-Jews alike, must try and persuade them to drop their demand for an eruv or else legally proscribe their arrogant behaviour. I'm an atheist myself, yet suspending disbelief for a moment, no matter how hard I try I cannot imagine God taking time off from the millions of children dying from starvation or AIDS to worry if Mr Levy in Golders Green has got his car-keys on him this Saturday and has stepped outside the eruv. What a contempt that demonstrates for the God they claim to worship!

There are many pyramids of apparently harmless religious belief – Jewish, Christian, Islam, Hindu – that are based on trivia like wearing or not wearing a hat, cutting or not cutting your hair, fasting or feasting on certain days or putting a wire round your neighbourhood. Protesting whenever we see people adding pious rubbish to the base of this pyramid may help in some small way to reduce the support for those at the top with rifles in their hands.

Mr Acker's letter ties in neatly with the final, and surely the maddest story of this summer – that of the Muslim traffic warden in London who resigned his job because he could not wear a badge bearing the symbol of another faith (a miniscule cross at the crest of a crown) – then took the Metropolitan Police to an industrial tribunal!

Although he later dropped legal proceedings, it appears that the possibility of future cases of this sort so spooked the paranoid Met that they are now to offer non-Christian recruits cross-free badges.

According to a *Sunday Times* report (August 12) the Met is proposing to develop an alternative badge for people who do not want to sport the traditional one. Currently all officers in Britain's 51 police areas wear the badge which incorporates the St Edward's crown, topped with a cross so tiny not even an atheist would object. In a statement, the Met said it had long

cherished its association with the Crown. But its future depended on its "ability to attract and maintain the most talented people and cater for their individual needs and requirements". (Such as zealots who need frequent time off for prayers and are likely to throw a wobbly every time their religious sensitivities are bruised?)



The police helmet can easily be adapted to reflect the religious or cultural identity of its wearer, as this computer-generated image shows. As the religious have great difficulty in separating fact from fantasy, we have taken the precaution of hiding the identity of the model in case some hothead should declare a fatwa against him.

The initiative could be adopted nationwide after the Met's Deputy Commissioner Ian Blair discusses the issue with the Association of Chief Police Officers. But Inspector Glenn Smyth, chairman of the Metropolitan Police Federation, told the *Sunday Times*: "Uniform should be exactly what the word means – it should apply to everyone.

"We swear an oath of allegiance to the Queen. The crown is the symbol of that oath and this move attacks its meaning."

Tony Arbour, a Conservative member of the Greater London Authority, said it was political correctness "going mad".

At present there are 1,300 black or Asian officers in the force, or 4.9 percent of the total. It is not yet known what form the altered badge will take.

Our debt to Islam

TEACHING children how Muslim sages saved European philosophy in the "Dark Ages" could help bridge a modern culture gap, suggested Martin Wainwright, the *Guardian* Northern editor after a visit to Bradford, where he noticed a chemist advertising "yunani tibb" ("Greek medicine" in Urdu).

This led him to remind readers of the debt Western culture owes to Islam for saving the learning of Athens. As Wainwright said, without the work of a 500-year succession of Islamic scholars, we would have "lost the essence of Aristotle, much of Plato and scores of other ancients".

Two philosophers in particular, Avicenna (980-1037) and Averroes (1126-98), deserve to be better known here outside the professional circles where they are esteemed. The former, born in Bukhara in Central Asia, was studying Aristotle's *Metaphysics* at the age of 17, when the text had long been lost in Western Europe. Averroes produced detailed commentaries on the great Athenian and defended philosophy against those who condemned it as contrary to Islam. Indeed, he regarded religion as inferior to philosophy as a means of attaining knowledge, according to his English commentator Oliver Leaman, and was "doubtful about the possibility of personal immortality or of God being able to know that particular events had taken place".

Wainwright told us that the national curriculum reformers had tried to increase awareness of our debt to Islamic civilisation AD 600-1600 as a key stage 3 option or a shorter 15-hour "scheme of work" project on the cultural achievements of Islam, but the Department of Education couldn't tell him how many pupils take it up. He called for the KS3 options to be highlighted and for simple readable textbooks to be provided.

Wainwright did his bit on radio with an account of Averroes' life and work (Radio 4, July 26). But he acknowledged that Muslims themselves find the "sage of Cordoba" disturbing.

"What can they make of a man who complained that curbs on women wasted the potential of half the population of the Islamic world – and this way back in the 12th century?" he asked. A good question.

Unanswered Question

ANOTHER Martin – Woolcott this time – dealt in the same issue with the Palestine suicide bombers who, as he said, play into Ariel Sharon's hands. Of course one can appreciate the desperation that drives them to do it, backed by religious fervour; but as the older

Bush's chief of staff at the White House, John Sununu, recently told a conference of Arab journalists and academics: "Ask yourself what Sharon wants. Does he want more suicide bombers? Or does he want no suicide bombers?"

From Woolcott's account it seems this question received no answer.

Remembering the monk

A GENETICS conference held in May in the former Augustine monastery of St Thomas in Brno in the Czech Republic resolved to restore the famous garden and greenhouse where Gregor Mendel conducted his experiments on peas and discovered the mechanics of inheritance. Sir Paul Nurse of Cancer Research observed that the monastery is pretty much the same as it was in Mendel's time, and we have the opportunity to preserve it as "a major site for science".

Mendel, who was born in 1822, entered the monastery in 1843, and was encouraged in his scientific work and studies by the then abbot, Cyrill Napp. After Napp's death Mendel was elected abbot so, for the last 16 years of his life found little time for his teaching and further studies; and, alas, after his death all his personal and scientific papers were burnt, possibly out of jealousy by his successor.

It has been aptly said that Mendel was no ordinary monk, and it is a mistake to think of St Thomas as a cloistered retreat. Abbot Napp encouraged his monks in scientific studies and sent Mendel to the University of Vienna to study science. And although Mendel was no doubt religious, his biographer, Robin Marantz Henig, points out that, remarkably, neither in his meteorological observations nor in his experimental work with peas, did Mendel make "even the smallest gesture ... to the hand of God". If there is a deity in either of these lectures, she continued, "it is the deity of scientific observation, the presence of God through the power of deductive reasoning" (*A Monk and Two Peas*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, page 160), a book I heartily recommend.

From prison to pastor

IT may be screwed up logic, but we have all heard that "joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance". It makes a good story for the newspapers, too. And so we read about Barry Minkow who, in the mid-80s was the American Dream come true: a self-made teenage millionaire. But then he was imprisoned for a huge stock market fraud. Today, as a *Guardian* American reporter informed us (July 11) Minkow's mind is "on

higher things".

While serving seven-and-a-half years in prison he found God and is now senior pastor of the Community Bible Church in Mira Mesa, California.

And in this case we might share a little of heaven's joy. At least Barry Minkow is paying back his victims.

Death of priests

THE seven Roman Catholic seminaries that serve England and Wales – four in England, two in Rome and one in Valladolid, Spain – now have 300 empty places, according to a report in the *Guardian Higher Education* (July 2). There is no longer a steady supply of young men from "good Catholic families"; most these days are men in their 30s and 40s, and they are few and far between.

A commission set up by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales recently recommended that the four English seminaries should merge to form two, eg Ushaw College, outside Durham, joining with St Mary's, Oscott, near Birmingham.

Ushaw, which was built for 400 seminarians and is now down to 38, is apparently host to tens of thousands of visitors a year for conferences and courses on topics like "The Lord of the Rings and Christian Living" or "Old Testament Hebrew for Beginners"; but the commission's report questions whether these wider developments "are of benefit to the core work of priestly formation". And it has a point.

Pro-Palestinian Jews

NOT all Jews are Zionists. But the Neturei Karta Orthodox sect is so anti-Zionist that it openly supports Palestinian protest meetings.

At some risk, it should be added. One member of the group was assaulted when he attended a counter-demonstration to a pro-Israeli rally in London in May, and another who could not be named was receiving police protection following a spate of death threats (*Observer Magazine*, July 21).

Neturei Karta's objection to Israel is theological rather than political. The very existence of the Jewish state is diametrically opposed to Judaism.

The sect believes that the Jews have been exiled for their sins and are destined to suffer, a fate that will only be redeemed with the coming of the Messiah.

But most Jews, whether Zionists or not, think they have suffered enough already. And who can blame them?

Book reviews

ON May 4, 1849, as Thomas Henry Huxley was preparing to leave Australia, his fiancée, Henrietta Anne Heathorn, known as Nettie, presented him with a parting gift: a five-volume edition in the original Italian of Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*, describing the conquest of Jerusalem by the First Crusade in 1099. Nettie inscribed it on behalf of herself and her family. On July 28, 1911, in Eastbourne, she passed it on to her grandson Julian Huxley and inscribed it again.

Stephen Jay Gould bought the book at auction "for an affordable pittance" and reproduces Mrs Huxley's inscriptions for our benefit in the first essay in *I Have Landed*. But the essay and the book title refer to the arrival in New York of Gould's grandfather, a 13-year-old Hungarian immigrant, and an inscription in the first English grammar book that he bought. "I have landed" the boy wrote; and the date, September 11, 1901 was exactly a century before the Twin Towers tragedy.

There is, in fact, a lot of forgivable nostalgia and a little too much extraneity in this book, which doesn't quite measure up to *The Mismeasure of Man* and all those splendid volumes Gould has given us over the years. Perhaps we were expecting too much from a man who suffered from mesothelioma for the last 20 years, a deadly form of cancer caused by exposure to asbestos. During his illness he continued to study, research and lecture at Harvard (where he had been a Professor from the age of 26) while receiving experimental treatments. And, of course, he carried on writing. "When I'm writing it's the only time I don't feel pain", he told the *Washington Post*.

This book, then, is to be cherished as the last in a remarkable series; and there are many typical Gould "reflections", as well as the less significant "splashes". Above all it exemplifies the author's insistence that there should be no difference in the conceptual depth of his technical and general writing. Add to this his unflinching interest in all aspects of life which, as he reminds us, has continued on this planet "for at least 3.5 billion years, without a single micro-second of disruption". *Homo sapiens* hasn't even reached half a million years yet and only a fool, says Gould, would expect us to survive longer than, say, insects among multi-cellular animals, let alone "indestructible" bacteria.

No writer has done more to "put us in our place". He almost winces, he tells us, when he finds the first appearance of vertebrates on land, or of insects in the air, described as a "conquest" (a noun not an adjective, by the way). And a particularly sore point this: the dinosaurs are popularly presented as being vanquished by "superior" mammals, even though we know that "dinosaurs prevailed

over mammals for more than 130 million years".

Gould loves to link significant events, and the year 1859 provides him with a trio in which art meets science. Frederic Edwin Church's painting *The Heart of the Andes* was first exhibited in New York; the great German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt died; and, of course, Charles Darwin published the *The Origin of Species*. Darwin himself affords the link between first and last with a diary entry of 1832, as he stood in the heart of the Andes: "It has been for me a glorious day, like giving to a blind man eyes, he is overwhelmed by what he sees and cannot justly comprehend it. Such are my feelings, and such may they remain".

Colin McCall reviews

I HAVE LANDED: Splashes and Reflections in Natural History, by Stephen Jay Gould.
Jonathan Cape £17.99

Both Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace cited Humboldt as their inspiration, although the Darwinian world view confuted Humboldt's vision of natural harmony and unity.

Another Darwinian – and well-known rationalist – Sir E Ray Lankester makes his appearance because he was an unlikely attendee at the funeral of Karl Marx; unlikely because he was no Marxist. Lankester's writing may have lacked the spark and depth of the great British essayists in natural history, like the Huxleys, J B S Haldane and P B Medawar, but he was notably active in his opposition to spiritualism, helping Joseph McCabe to resist its temptations and, as Gould relates, unmasking the American medium Henry Slade in 1876.

Certain physicists like Lord Rutherford might have dismissed taxonomy as having little more intellectual depth than philately, but Gould stresses its importance to botany and zoology, not as objective and unchanging but as "active theories about the causes of natural order". And he records that Vladimir Nabokov, lepidopterist and novelist, described the years he spent at Harvard classifying small blue butterflies as "the most delightful and thrilling in all my adult life".

THE Annual Reunion of the Kindred Societies will take place on Sunday, September 22 in SPES Library, Red Lion Square, London WC1 at 2.30 pm. Keynote speaker will be Derek Lennard on *Satirising Religion – a laughing matter*. Refreshments, and music by the Toycore Swingtet. All welcome.

Gould tells us that on Monday, February 12, 2001, when two groups of researchers released the formal report of data for the human genome, he dropped his intended teaching schedule to discuss the importance of this work with his undergraduates. They were sharing a great day in the history of science and human understanding in general, he told them. But he warns, as ever, of the danger and, indeed, the failure of reductionism. "The reductionist method works triumphantly for simple systems", he writes, "predicting eclipses or the motion of planets (but not the histories of their complex surfaces) for example. But discovering how to unlock some systems doesn't mean we have "found the key for the conquest of all natural phenomena". Organisms, he insists, must be explained as organisms, not as "a summation of genes". And he reprints a piece he wrote for *Time* magazine summarising his views on "the fallacy of genetic determinism". He goes on to consider a gene in mice which allows adult mice to retain a natural openness for learning that young mice naturally possess but lose in aging. For some reason, though, perhaps because of the medium, he ends on a biblical note: "Perhaps Jesus expressed a good biological insight when he stated (Matthew 18:3), 'Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter the kingdom of heaven'".

In fact, *I Have Landed* perpetuates Gould's concern to placate religionists, assuring them that no scientific theory, including evolution, can pose any threat to religion – "for these two great tools of human understanding operate in complementary (not contrary) fashion in their totally separate realms". And what is religion's realm? It is, he says, "a search for spiritual meaning and ethical values". He's right in saying that no factual scientific discovery can, in principle, lead to ethical conclusions or to convictions about the "purpose" of our lives, although it may affect them. But there is no reason whatever for assigning ethical questions to the religious "domain". We don't need to read the Bible as "a source of moral debate and instruction". Gould should have shaken off that idea when he discarded the Judaism of his ancestors. And does it really matter whether Genesis 1 "tells a tale of differentiation rather than addition"? Myths are myths. Yes, we can all admire the dome of St Mark's in Venice and even examine it in detail, but not with the same intention as Gould: to advocate "the importance of ancient creation myths for our modern understanding of natural history" – which, frankly, is nil.

But we can forgive all in recognition of the stimulating reading that Stephen Jay Gould has provided over a quarter of a century. It goes without saying that his death leaves a great gap in the sphere of science writing.

Islamic law

A 30-YEARS-OLD woman, the mother of an eight-month-old baby, is to be stoned to death in Nigeria for committing adultery. The punishment will be administered in accordance with *Sharia*, the sacred law of Islam which governs Muslim life. A BBC reporter said that there is much support, indeed enthusiasm, for the sentence amongst those of the Muslim faith in Nigeria.

Those who opposed atheists on *Thought for the Day* on BBC radio insisted that retaining a purely religious perspective on events was a valuable contribution to the community and must be preserved.

Therefore, while atheists are banned from *Thought for the Day*, advocates of the Muslim faith, under whose *aegis* the woman is to be killed, are acceptable. There was much criticism of atheists by religious defenders of the programme.

I have, at the time of writing, heard no criticism from the same people for the religion under whose laws this woman will meet her barbaric death.

DENIS WATKINS
Pembrokeshire

Whither secularism?

I SHOULD like to congratulate Jim Ross on his most interesting article, "Secularism is not Enough" (*Freethinker*, July) Nor is it! At least not if it confines itself to a merely negative programme of criticism of, and attacks on, the (admittedly absurd) beliefs and irrational practices of those who claim to believe in a "God". For this is no way to win the hearts and minds of the many who, while they no longer find nourishment in what is on offer in the various churches, are equally indifferent to an appeal to a sterile rationalism. What they need is, as Jim Ross suggests, a social centre, a sense of fellowship, of leadership, practical advice and support – in short, a positive programme of rewarded involvement which establishes the sense of being a congregation.

I do appreciate that it is far easier to suggest such ideas than to actually operate them – but it has been done: the churches themselves show us the way. After all, this is how they established themselves (and they were quite ready to make use of existing institutions and ideologies as far as they could) and how the most successful of them still operate – and it is tip to us to learn from and emulate (if we can) the Old Enemy.

When we have hammered out an ideology and practice of Life-worship that is plainly superior to "God"-worship and can take it out on the streets and find an audience, then we

may find that we can indeed gain a response from such numbers of enthusiasts that we can really carry weight with those who inhabit the corridors of power.

ALBERT ADLER
London

IN reply to my article, "Secularism is not Enough", S E Lord (*Points of View*, August), may be right in saying that there is no automatic unity of purpose between secularists and the humanists of the BHA, but if so it is one explanation of the current and prospectively continuing underachievement of both bodies, and others forming part of the secularist/humanist movement.

He calls for ways to bypass the censorship of the media and politicians. We have been trying to do just this for long enough, and our successes are not only limited but also more apparent than real. One of my points is that we are unlikely to make our achievements real unless we change and at least to some extent unify the message. Creating a proto-religion is no part of my purpose but, if we are to displace not only formal, organised religion, but also the religiously originated patterns of thought inbred by centuries of practice we have to weld secularism/humanism into a culture of general relevance and political impact. This does not mean that secularists and humanists have to agree about what to do with the NHS, the educational curriculum or the Private Finance Initiative. It does mean that they have to agree about certain basics which are to govern the approach to moral issues and public policies. If they can't, so much the worse for our prospects.

JIM ROSS
Perth

Mental abuse

IT HAS become a common place for society to be outraged by reports of children being raped by men of god, but mental abuse seems to be overlooked. In view of this government's intention to blunder ahead with the promotion of more faith schools it has become imperative that new laws are implemented to protect children from mental cruelty inflicted on them by religious fundamentalists.

It should be illegal to teach an impressionable child that the most overwhelmingly important thing in their life is to love an invisible all-powerful, all-knowing being.

To be taught that there is no hiding place from this being because he is continually reading their most secret thoughts; that this being loves them so much that he allowed himself to be tortured slowly to death especially for them; that if they were to hurt his feelings in some

ostensibly trivial way that had been declared a sin, this same loving being, when they die, would subject them to unimaginable torture for ever and ever is wrong.

Even if the victims of this indoctrination manage to lever the anvil of superstition off their back and blot out the embarrassing memories of talking to statues, there will always remain an undervaluing and distrust of education.

These suspicions are reinforced when academics and even scientists are observed not denying but claiming that they actually believe that a man can literally change a piece of wafer into a god by saying hocus pocus to it.

JIM CASS
Bishop Auckland

Islamophobia

A BELATED comment reference to Equivocation and Islamophobia: Colin McCall (*Down to Earth*, July) quoted Ian Buruma as saying that the TV programme *Goodness, Gracious Me* treated Islam satirically." I think Buruma was wrong. The programme satirised the attitudes of immigrant expatriates from the Indian subcontinent and the characters portrayed in the programme could as likely have been Hindu, Parsee, Sikh, Buddhist, Jewish, even Christian or any other of the numerous religions there.

It's to the credit of the show's producers and a reason for its success that they did not satirise any religion; had they done so there would have been trouble – even a *fatwa*... Taking the piss out of Muslims is not, nor would have been, the way forward.

HAL KEARSLEY
Norwich

Animal rights v Islam

IN *At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers*, Rushdie's critique of what passes for liberalism, there is this reference to the type who "have openly stated that they are interested in buying the magic footwear only in order to burn it, and this is not, in the view of the liberal Auctioneers, a reprehensible programme".

Nor – the writer doesn't have to add – is it for the proponents of Islam. But this much has to be said for that political system: it has always been honestly based on terror. Which means that it is not being perniciously asking of animal rightists the difference between an advertised faith in predictable terror of one sort or another, and the random use of baseball bats, nail bombs and arson as

engines of conversation in the Auction Room.

I ask because a recent letter implies that a major objection to Islam is not that it is totalitarian but the butchering techniques that are common to both the Ibrahimic cults. At least an apology is offered to the animal victim which is more than Mr Cass and many employees of Huntingdon Life Sciences received.

As things stand, were I compelled in some Sartrean theatrical scenario to choose between animal rightists and Islam, I wouldn't hesitate, and I say this after long experience of the *dar ul islam*.

KEITH BELL
Wrexham

Faith Health Practices

THE subject of faith schools has been the subject of much recent discussion. I have recently become aware of another area where segregation by faith might be raising its ugly head.

The start of my story must be familiar to many secularists. I was talking over the phone to a receptionist at the NHS GP practice where I am registered. In order to establish who I was, the receptionist asked for first my surname and then my Christian name. I told her that not being a Christian I did not have a Christian name, she assured me that everybody had a Christian name, I assured her that my first name was in fact a Jewish one, and she grudgingly agreed to accept my first name even if it was not Christian.

All very boring, and certainly not worth writing a letter about.

However, I decided I would raise it with my GP when next I saw him. I do feel that the receptionists should not embarrass patients in this way, and actually I think that the GP agreed. It was what the GP then said that is of interest.

He said that he was surprised that I had had this problem because most of the receptionists were not Christians, and he then added, more by way of conversation than because it was important, that though the receptionists were not, the doctors in the practice were all Christians.

Still in the spirit of conversation, I pursued this last point. I said that the doctors all being Christians was presumably an "It so happens that ..." rather than an "As a matter of practice policy..." At this point the doctor clammed up, and simply told me that he was not prepared to discuss partnership policy with me.

So he did not actually state that the practice – a taxpayer funded NHS practice,

remember – had a Christians-only policy. But I could not help but come away with the impression that the practice did have such a policy.

I presume I do not need to argue here why such a policy is offensive and quite unacceptable. But what can anyone do about a practice pursuing such a policy?

Does the Race Relations legislation cover it? – I suspect not. Does any other current legislation cover it? – I am not a lawyer, but again I suspect not. Should there be? – well, it was in order to start a debate on this point that I thought the issue worth raising.

DAVID M GOSTYN
Eastbourne

Absence of evidence

IT IS all too obvious to freethinkers that facts about gods are lacking, R G Silson (*Points of View*, August). Of course, an absence of evidence does not imply evidence of absence. However, my reference to maths was partly to point to the nonsense of the generality of the "cannot prove a negative" idea. But it also points to inconsistent sets of axioms. For example, a theist, lacking facts, may still posit the existence of some being which is both omnipotent and loving. However, it is easy to prove that such a being simply cannot exist: it cannot possess both qualities simultaneously. A door-stepping theist in such circumstances will either pervert the English language or retreat to mystification.

For a few years in my teens, following my rejection of religion, I called myself an agnostic. But for the last 30+ years I've stopped pussyfooting: I call myself an atheist – logically, gods do not exist.

PETER LANCASTER
Essex

Creationism

When confronted with theories, I prefer the Theory of Evolution to the Theory of God, on the grounds that the former is evidence-based.

DAVID K GORRINGE
Herefordshire

DONALD Room (*Points of View*, August) made some interesting points about the various schools of creationist "thought", and about my portrayal of them.

He suggests that I don't seem to have studied Old Earth creationism very closely. Fair comment. I don't agree, however – it's an area I am depressingly familiar with.

Up until the time of Darwin and Wallace, Old Earth creationism was the "default" position for most scientists who had considered the

issue of the age of the earth. Geological work had demonstrated problems with Usher's biblical chronology (that had dated creation to about 4000 BC).

Owen, Sedgewick, Agassiz, Lyell and the rest were well aware of this. Popular public and much theological opinion was rather different, inclining (mainly due to Usher) towards Young Earth belief. Before the rise of science, opinions about the age of the earth were more philosophical and ranged from its having been present from eternity to its being of very recent origin. These speculations derived from Greek thought and changed little over the centuries. All had their adherents. Theology seemed able to accommodate most reasonably well (except for the "eternal earth", which conflicted just too strongly with Genesis to be acceptable).

Mr Room is right about the arguments used by Old Earthers to contest the claims of Young Earthers. They do rely upon the same evidence that I and others would point to in support of the extreme antiquity of the earth. He's also right about their acceptance of fossil succession and about the conclusions the Old Earthers draw on the basis of the evidence.

These facts don't materially affect my argument, however. The point I was trying to make was about the incompatible and contradictory nature of the three main creationist positions.

Mr Room says that creationists do not "reject scientific data which contradicts Genesis, but reinterpret Genesis to fit the data". The fact is that some do, and some don't – but that most do both.

There is a vast amount of data available that shows clearly just how much evidence the creationists (of all kinds) deny. One of their least prepossessing habits is their constant repetition of errors, even when these have been time and again pointed out to them. Three examples may suffice. The first relates to their continuing insistence that the second law of thermodynamics refutes the possibility of evolution.

The second is their insistence upon the absence in the fossil record of transitional forms. The third concerns Haeckel's errors in embryology, which creationists continue to treat as having some contemporary scientific relevance. All of these are manifestly nonsensical abuses and denials of evidence.

There are no "scholarly" institutes (in the normal meaning of the word scholarly) working to defend creationism, or to tackle real scientific problems. There are, however, establishments working day and night to promote distortion and disinformation about evolution and to reinterpret the Bible by means of all kinds of linguistic tricks and weaselly redefinitions. It may look like scholarship, but it's cer-



tainly not disinterested and objective: and it's certainly nothing to do with science. The only proper science being done (and it grieves me to say this, but it's the truth) is by the Catholic Church in its various research departments. It's significant that the Catholic Church has no problem with evolution. Catholic theology may be barking, but their science is on the whole OK, and at times has made significant contributions to knowledge (in, admittedly, some fairly restricted areas).

Mr Rooum writes that "the alternatives" — that is, the beliefs of the three different creationist schools — "are the subject of scholarly discussion, not 'bitter disputes'", as I had suggested they were. This is the impression that they would like to give, certainly. But the evidence points in another direction. These people hate each other's guts, and when they think they're out of public earshot don't hesitate to demonstrate the fact. Their behaviour is analogous to infighting within political parties — rough and vicious on the inside, but presenting a model of smooth harmony to the outside world. All I'd say is — don't be deceived by this ploy.

The first and last attempt by a real scientist to honestly and intelligently make sense of the evidence for evolution in terms of fundamentalist theology was by Philip Henry Gosse (father of that wonderful writer, Edmund Gosse). He was well equipped, both theologically and scientifically — and despite his narrowness was a man of unimpeachable integrity, unlike so many of his modern avatars. His book *Omphalos*, published in 1857, was met with silence at best and contempt and ridicule at worst. He was left by its reception broken and inconsolable. Since that time, the Hams and Gishes and Demskis and the rest have done pretend science and offered theology of the most inane kind that it is possible to conceive of. Dr Alan Hayward is just another in that long line, as any reading of his work will swiftly show. I'd offer a few quotes from him, but frankly he doesn't even deserve bad publicity!

NORMAN PRIDMORE
Sleaford

Jews and Palestinians

DEREK Wilkes (*Points of View*, July 2002) writes that it is a lie that "Jews drove the Palestinian inhabitants from their ancestral properties". Any honest Israeli would disagree with him. Yitzhak Rabin, then a military commander, records that, after the taking of the Arab towns of Lydda and Ramleh (both of which had been allotted to the Arabs by the UN partition plan): "I agreed [with Ben Gurion] that it was essential to drive the inhab-

itants out — the population did not leave willingly. There was no way of avoiding the use of force and warning shots in order to make the inhabitants march the ten to fifteen miles..." (*New York Times*, October 23, 1979). One of those expelled on this occasion was George Habash, years later the leader of the Palestinian terrorist organisation PFLP.

Has Mr. Wilkes not read about the paramilitary groups such as Irgun Zvei Leumi and the Stern Gang who made it their business to evict and terrorise Palestinians from their homes? Has he not heard of Deir Yassin, a village where 120 Palestinians were massacred? It is true that there were atrocities on both sides, but I have yet to find the objective scholar who would deny that the huge majority of Palestinians fled through well-founded fear, or were physically expelled.

Mr Wilkes also asks "How come a million Palestinian Arabs are today living in Israel as equal citizens?"

He should tell that to Dr F Mikdadi who wrote to the *Independent* a couple of months ago (copy available): "I have before me the deeds that testify to my father's ownership of land in Netanya. He has passed away and I am one of his heirs. I know that this land is lost to the Palestinians ... I am willing to [make this] compromise to ensure that both peoples live in peace." What further compromises can we ask of the Palestinians at this point? There can be no peace until Israel withdraws to the 1967 border. She would still be left, after all, with 78 per cent of the original Palestine.

DAVE SIMMONDS
Essex

I AM sorry for your correspondent Jack Hastie who wants to correct some of the events in Palestine. He obviously has not studied the accurate series of events which led up to the Israeli Declaration of Independence in 1948. The events he described took place "in the fog of war" when the fledgling State was under attack by the armies of the surrounding Arab States.

He seems to omit the dozens of attacks made on peaceful Jewish settlers by Arab mobs in the 1920s and 1930s egged on by the Mufti of Jerusalem later to be recognised by Nazi Germany. A particular cruel series of murders of Jews took place in August 1929 when individual murders took place in Hebron and at Jerusalem. The British authorities of the time had to rush troops to these sites to defend civilians.

He refers to Jewish "terrorist groups" who attacked Arabs in 1948. These groups were founded in the 1920s to defend the peaceful settlements of Jews who came in a non-violent way to escape from the rising anti-semitism in

Germany and earlier in the 1890s to leave behind the Russian pogroms. These self-defence groups were driven underground by the British authorities. He should not lap up so easily the persistent Arab propaganda painting the infant State of Israel as a violent intruder when in fact it has proved itself to be the only democratic, progressive and liberal entity surrounded by a hostile Arab world.

I should add that I am secular, but remain proud of my Jewish background

LEWIS CLIGMAN
Middlesex

Editor's note: This subject has generated a great deal of correspondence, not all of which we were able to accommodate in this issue. Letters not published this month will be held over until October.

Please note change of address

Until further notice
please address all
correspondence to:

The Freethinker
G W Foote
& Co Ltd

25 Red Lion Square
London WC1R 4RL
Tel: 01273 680531

Please address
all e-mails to:
fteditor@aol.com

atheist & humanist contacts & events

Blackpool & Fylde Humanist Group: Information: Ivor Moll, 6 The Brooklands, Wrea Green, Preston PR4 2NQ. 01772 686816.

Brighton & Hove Humanist Group: Information on 01273 733215. Vallance Community Centre, Sackville Road and Clarendon Road, Hove. Sunday, Sunday, October 6, 4pm. Public meeting.

Bristol Humanists: Information: Margaret Dearnaley on 0117 904 9490.

Bromley Humanists: Meetings on the second Tuesday of the month, 8 pm, at Friends Meeting House, Ravensbourne Road, Bromley. Information: 020 8777 1680. Website: www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com.

Chiltern Humanists: Information: 01494 771851.

Cornwall Humanists: Information: B Mercer, "Amber", Short Cross Road, Mount Hawke, Truro TR4 8EA. Tel. 01209 890690.

Cotswold Humanists: Information: Philip Howell, 2 Cleavelands Close, Cheltenham GL50 4PZ. Tel 01242 528743.

Coventry and Warwickshire Humanists: Information: 01926 858450. Roy Saich, 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth, CV8 2HB.

Devon Humanists: Information: Roger McCallister, 21 Southdowns Road, Dawlish, EX7 0LB. Tel: 01626 864046.

Ealing Humanists: Information: Secretary Alex Hill 0208 741 7016 or Charles Rudd 020 8904 6599.

East Cheshire and High Peak Secular Group: Information: Carl Pinel 01298 815575.

East Kent Humanists: Information: Tel. 01843 864506. Talks and discussions on ten Sunday afternoons in Canterbury.

Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA): Information: 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth CV8 2HB. Tel 01926 858450. Friday, September 13, 7.30pm. Public meeting. Speaker: Rictor Norton, author, *Mother Clap's Molly House*.

Greater Manchester Humanist Group: Information: Niall Power. Tel 0161 2865349. Monthly meetings (second Wednesday) Friends Meeting House, Mount Street, Manchester. Wednesday, September 11, 7.30pm. Public meeting.

Hampstead Humanist Society: Information: N I Barnes, 10 Stevenson House, Boundary Road, London NW8 0HP.

Harrow Humanist Society: Information: 020 8863 2977. Monthly meetings, December – June (except January).

Havering & District Humanist Society: Information: J Condon 01708 473597 or Rita Manton 01708 762575. Friends Meeting House, 7 Balgores Crescent, Gidea Park. Thursday, September 5, 8pm. Deborah Templeman: *The Case for Veganism*.

Humanist Society of Scotland: Secretary: Ivan Middleton, 26 Inverleith Row, Edinburgh EH3 5QH. Tel. 0131 552 9046. Press and Information Officer: Robin Wood, 37 Inchmurrin Drive, Kilmarnock, Ayrshire. Tel. 01563 526710. Website: www.humanism-scotland.org.uk.

Glasgow Group: Information: Alan Hennes. Tel. 07010 704776. Email: alan@humanism-scotland.org.uk.

Edinburgh Group: Information: 2 Saville Terrace, Edinburgh EH9 3AD. Tel 0131 667 8389.

Leeds & District Humanist Group: Information Robert Tee on 0113 2577009. Swarthmore, Woodhouse Square, Leeds. Tuesday. October 8, 8pm. Jennifer Jackson: *Ethical Issues in Medicine*.

Leicester Secular Society: Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB. Tel. 0116 2622250/0116 241 4060. Public Meeting: Sunday, 6.30pm. Programme from above address.

Lewisham Humanist Group: Information: Denis Cobell: 020 8690 4645. Website: www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6. Thursday, September 26, 8pm. Discussion: *How Much Freedom Should we Trade for Security?*

Mid-Wales Humanists: Information: Jane Hibbert on 01654 702883.

Musical Heathens: Monthly meetings for music and discussion (Coventry and Leamington Spa). Information: Karl Heath. Tel. 02476 673306.

North East Humanists (Teesside Group): Information: C McEwan on 01642 817541.

North East Humanists (Tyneside Group): Information: The Secretary on 01434 632936.

North Stafford & South Cheshire Humanists: Information: Sue Willson on 01782 662693.

North London Humanist Group: Monthly meetings. Information: Anne Toy on 020 8360 1828.

Norwich Humanist Group: Information: Vincent G Chainey, Le Chene, 4 Mill Street, Bradenham, Thetford IP25 7PN. Tel. 01362 820982.

Sheffield Humanist Society: Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street, Sheffield. Wednesday, October 2, 8pm. Dave Tucker: *Withdrawal from RE*.

South Hampshire Humanists: Information: 11 Glenwood Avenue, Southampton, SO16 3PY. Tel: 02380 769120.

South Place Ethical Society: Weekly talks/meetings/concerts Sundays 11am and 3pm at Conway Hall Library, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Tel: 020 7242 8037/4. Monthly programme on request.

Somerset: Details of South Somerset Humanists' meetings in Yeovil from Wendy Sturgess. Tel. 01458 274456.

Sutton Humanist Group: Information: 020 8642 4577. Friends Meeting House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Website: www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com. Wednesday, September 11, 8pm. Public meeting. Subject: *Applying Humanist Ethics*.

Welsh Marches Humanist Group: Information: 01568 770282.

West Glamorgan Humanist Group: Information: 01792 206108 or 01792 296375, or write Julie Norris, 3 Maple Grove, Uplands, Swansea SA2 0JY.

West Kent Secular Humanist Group: Information: Maggie Fraser. Tel: 01892 523858. E-mail: melgin@waitrose.com.

Ulster Humanist Association. Information: Brian McClinton, 25 Riverside Drive, Lisburn BT27 4HE. Tel: (028) 9267 7264. E-mail: brian@mcclinton.to website: www.ulsterhumanist.freeservers.com

**Please send your listings and events notices to:
Bill McIlroy, Flat 3, Somerhill Lodge, Somerhill Road,
Hove, Sussex BN3 1RU.**